Researching Your pre-May 1848 NJ Ancestors

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Introduction

- New Jersey is the second state in the U.S. to implement the continuous collection of Vital Records (Births, Marriages, and Deaths) beginning in May 1848 (and still going strong).
- This means we have records containing detailed authoritative personal information for most NJ residents spanning over 160 years.
- For people researching relatives who lived before May 1848, there is not an authoritative source which gives as accurate date information as the Vital Records Collection.
- However, there are records sets that may help to give you clues relating to Birth, Marriage, or Death Dates
Genealogy Basics

- Genealogy is the study of a continuous line of descent originating with a single person (you).
- The main goal of Genealogy is to locate a birth, marriage, and death event for each ancestor, working back from death to birth in generational order.
- It becomes harder when Vital Records collections don’t exist to connect the generations. Birth and Deaths were only created in May 1848. There are two Marriage collections that extend back to the Colonial Era.
- Sometimes locating a date or record simply involves checking an index. Other times you may need to look at many resources.
- There are two document types that can help find Vital Record dates: Primary Documents and Secondary Resources.
Primary Documents in the Pre-Vital Records Era

- Primary documents were created within a person’s general lifetime and the informant was generally the person themselves or someone who knew them well.
- We assume that the information provided is highly accurate, and thus these are the most authoritative source you can find.
- Most useful pre-1848 document of this type is a Will, because it lists family relationships and also provides a probate date, which is generally the same as the year of death.
- Other examples: Deeds (may also list family members and provide a year of death), Marriage Records (exact date, parties’ names, and possibly location/officiant), and Court Records (especially estate cases)
- Can find Primary Documents in records repositories such as Archives and Historical Societies. The New Jersey State Archives will have the most useful items for researchers for this time period.
Secondary Resources in the Pre-May 1848

- Secondary Resources are published items produced long after a person’s death. The author generally did not know the subject and may or may not have relied on primary documents for research.
- Examples: Primary Document Indexes, Family and Town Histories
- Many Records Repositories, Libraries, and Historical Societies have large collections of the records.
- These are also likely to be digitized on sites such as Ancestry.com, HeritageQuest, Google Books, and Archive.org.
- You may start your pre-May 1848 research with these, as it may provide a place to start that you can’t get from Primary Documents of this era.
- However, remain skeptical of information from Family or Town Histories produced in the late 19th/early 20th century, as they don’t always cite their sources.
- The State Library has a large collection of Secondary Resources, mostly family histories, for New Jersey and across the country.
Where do I start???

- Always start with the final event in a person’s life (death) and work your way forward (marriage, birth).
- If you are lucky, your relative married or died after May 1848 so you can check Vital Records (remember, these are likely to have birth date and parents’ names).
- If the person married between May 1848 and May 1878 check the State Archives’ searchable Marriage Index (you may also order records from here).
- If the person died between June 1878 and June 1895, check the State Archives’ searchable Death Index.
- If the person married or died at any other time post-May 1848, check FamilySearch.org’s New Jersey Marriage or Death indexes, which include records from the NJ State Vital Records collection (available at the State Archives.)
- If the relative did not marry or die after May 1848, start the the Secretary of State’s Estate Records ca. 1670-1901. These won’t include an exact date of death, but the probate year is generally the same as death year. If there is a will, of course this will include all kinds of kin relationships.

A note about FamilySearch and the NJ State Vital Records: State Vital Records are organized on a fiscal year (May-May 1848-1878, July-June 1878-1900), but in FamilySearch are treated as though they are on a calendar year. This means events which took place between January and June are listed as occurring a year earlier than they actually did. There are written instructions on how to check the correct year in my “Introduction to New Jersey Genealogy” presentation on the Genealogy Research Guide.
Secretary of State’s Estate Papers

- Secretary of State’s Office began collecting estate papers in colonial times. These include wills, inventories, administrations, guardianships, and other documents.
- Wills will have useful kinship information, however any records will provide a probate year (same as year of death)
- Index to Wills ca. 1670-1901 is a published index available at the State Library or State Archives (also online via Ancestry and Archive.org)
- If you’re looking for colonial or early 19th century documents, try the Will Abstracts, going up to 1817. The Archives and Library both have this publication and you can get it online via Ancestry and Google Books or Archive.org
- Secretary of State’s Estate Papers can be ordered from the Archives online or by mail, or you may use microfilm at the Archives in person
Will of Silas Hathaway 1147N Morris County
Great Resources: County Estate Papers

- Records start in 1790’s for older counties or when the county was founded (for newer counties)
- These are Estate Papers filed with the County Surrogate’s Office, usually related to court actions regarding the estate
- The name of the records collection will vary county to county
- The indexes to these collections are likely on microfilm, available at the State Archives (except Morris County) for in-person use only or through the relevant County Surrogate
Great Resources: Early Land Records

- Early Land Records encompasses several colonial collections ca. 1664-1799 including: Secretary of State's Deeds, East and West Jersey Proprietors Survey Books, and West Jersey Proprietors Loose Surveys
- The most useful Genealogical information is likely to be included in the Deeds collection
- This type of record may include a year (or even month!) of death, family relationships, and history of who owned the property, especially when dealing with estate sales or marriage bequest
- There is an online index to this collection on the State Archives webpage, and again, records can be ordered from here

Secretary of State’s Deeds are my babies. I worked on this collection, and have worked hard to get as many detailed abstracts of the deeds up on the Early Land Records Index as I possibly could before I left the Archives. Especially the 184 Native American Deeds. Please check and use this index rather than the book Colonial Conveyances, because we’ve corrected mistakes and added a lot more detailed information.
Ann Pidgeon to Katherine Peirce Book N p.38
Great Resources: County Deeds

- Cover same time frame as County wills (start in about 1790 or when county founded) and continue to present
- Archives has microfilmed copies of indexes and some deeds (usually up to about 1900). These are available for in-person use only.
- County Clerks Offices own originals, and thus customers may order records remotely from them.
- These records have same information available (family kinship, possible month and year of death, and history of property) as Early Land Records collections
Great Resources: Supreme Court Case Files

- Court Case Files heard by the NJ Supreme Court, most are very light on information, but occasionally you might hit a gold mine.
- May Contain basic residential and occupational information
- May include ancestor’s signature
- For estate cases, may include useful family information, and possibly death date (year and month)
- There is an online index to Supreme Court Case Files on the State Archives’ website and remote ordering is available. Records are also available for in-person use at the Archives.

The online index contains some highly detailed abstracts of records with the role your ancestor played in the case listed. If your ancestor was on a jury list or served as a witness, you may get a copy of his signature.
Great Resources: Colonial Marriage Records

- Colonial Marriage Bonds were agreements put in place to protect the bride’s dowry, so only wealthier couples would get one.
- These provide very little detail other than parties’ names, and sometimes occupation and county of residence.
- If either the bride or groom was underage (under 21 years old), their parents would need to give permission for the marriage. A signed permission note from the parents is included in the bond application.
- Marriage Bonds do not provide a marriage date, only the date the bond was signed, but if one was taken out, the couple almost certainly married.
- There are also limited early colonial marriage records (most of which were recorded in Deed books), which will include an exact marriage date, parties’ names, location and officiant (possibly), but little other information.
- This collection of Marriage Bonds and Records have an index on the State Archives’ website and are available for remote ordering.

You may also find some newspaper announcements of marriages in the Extracts from Colonial Newspapers series of books (goes up to 1782).
Marriage Bond Katherine Talbot and Edward Peirce
Great Resources: County Marriage Records

- Like other county records, these begin in the 1790’s (or when county was formed) and cover until about 1900.
- Record will provide parties’ names, exact date of marriage, location of marriage, and officiant, but no other information.
- Searchable online index (with some digitized images visible if you log in) is available on FamilySearch.org. This index is separate from the New Jersey Marriage Index, which contains State vital records.
- Use these records to verify names and move on to other collections with more information such as Deeds and Estate Records.
Great Resources at the State Library: Books

We have an extensive family history section, plus secondary resources for several other states and countries. You may search the library catalog online at www.njstatelib.org, or through the Genealogy Research Guide. The publications below are mostly indexes to primary resources or transcriptions:

- **Family Histories**—these cover about ⅓ of our Genealogy Collection, if relative was part of a prominent family these are extremely useful sources to connect generations
- **White’s Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files** (A973.33 W588)—genealogical information taken from Revolutionary War Patriot soldiers, also give pension number
- **Index to New Jersey Wills**—Index to Secretary of State’s wills ca. 1670-1900 over at the Archives, excellent to check if someone died pre-1900
- **Index to the Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey** (A974.9 G323 Index)—contains transcribed historical records recorded by Members of the Genealogical Society of New Jersey. These are awesome resources for researchers looking for ancestors prior to May 1848.
Family History Section NJSL
Great Resources at the State Library: Newspapers

- There is a small collection of colonial-era newspapers on microfilm at the Library.
- Most of these are out of New York City (which may cover parts of Northern NJ), and the State Gazette (and its many names) out of Burlington and later Trenton.
- In addition, there are published extracts from Colonial Newspapers ending in 1782, which covers multiple New Jersey Newspapers.
- Newspapers may have: descriptions of runaways (indentured servants or slaves), estate sales, obituaries, death or marriage notices, and other announcements.
Katherine Basse Talbot Peirce Death Notice

NEW JERSEY CRANBURY SOCIETY.

PHILADELPHIA, April 4.

Minister: Dr. John Basse, late of Cranbury, N.J., recently at Mrs. Philip Lawrance, daughter of Capt. Richard Langmore, of Princeton, New-Jersey.

PHILADELPHIA, April 4.

In memory of the late Mrs. Katherine Basse Talbot Peirce, who departed this life on the 22d of March last, in her 78th year, her friends and acquaintances are requested to attend her funeral on Monday, the 2d inst., at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, at her late residence in this city. 

The remains of the deceased will be removed to Cranbury, N. J., on Tuesday, the 3d inst., at 10 o'clock in the morning, and will be interred in the burial-ground of the New Jersey Cranbury Society. 

The family express their sincere thanks to all who have contributed to the comfort of the deceased during her illness, and who have borne so tenderly and affectionately to her last hour.

Philadelphia, April 4th, 1794.

Burlington, May 4th, 1794.

To all to whom it may concern:

A Plantation, called Swiss Valley, stands on the left road above a mile and a half from the city of Burlington, located northward by Adelphi Creek, containing about 15 acres of land, 2 acres of woods and meadows, the remainder under good standing and the greatest part of the best kind, being under good sod for at least 20 years, and in a state of cultivation. About 3 acres of land are cleared of all trees and under a very good wheat. The plantation is about 200 yards from the city, and is surrounded by fine-sized apple trees and a variety of other trees and shrubs. The estate is now in the possession of Mr. Charles Basse, late of Cranbury, N. J., who has built a handsome dwelling house, containing 5 rooms, with a office under the same, and a
Great Resources at the State Library: Databases

Any of these databases may be accessed here at the library with your state library card, or if you are a state employee, remotely with your state library card (except Ancestry, which is in-house use only). FamilySearch.org can be accessed for free anywhere.

- Heritage Quest has scanned Revolutionary War pensions and searchable town and family history books
- FamilySearch has (and is currently adding) digitized NJ County Records (including marriages)
- Ancestry has numerous useful primary document collections. If you are looking to see if the site has a particular record group, use the New Collections function (collection does not have to be new) to look for it. Particularly useful are the Federal Population Census Schedules (although pre-1850 lists head of house only).
- Find a Grave has images of cemeteries and grave sites from all over the U.S. This may help to confirm an exact date of death or family relationship. Note that some of the profiles provide extensive information about the deceased. If the information is not cited, take with a grain of salt.
Basse Family Example

Jeremiah Basse was one of New Jersey’s earliest governors, serving from 1698-1699. Basse was a powerful landowner, and a force for Church of England politicians, challenging Quaker authority in West New Jersey. Early in his career, he served as a land agent for Dr. Daniel Coxe and the West New Jersey Society. In addition to serving as Governor, he held several key positions in New Jersey until his death in 1725.

Basse is one of the lesser known Governors, and very little information is available about his personal life as a result.

I got into Basse family history while working on a deed in which his two daughters sold some of his land.

This example will really show you how deeds can be genealogical goldmines!
What Can We Learn From Book N p.38

- We see the text of Jeremiah Basse’s will, which provides for his three children Birchfield (son), Anne (daughter), and Katherine (daughter).
- We know that Jeremiah and his son Birchfield have both died, but Elizabeth Basse, Jeremiah’s wife and the children’s mother is still alive.
- We know that Katherine was married to Robert Talbot at the time of her father’s death, and that Robert Talbot has since died. We know she then remarried Edward Peirce, who has also since died.
- We know that Anne married a Pidgeon, who has since died.
Information we can use to research this family

- The document confirmed where everyone was living (Burlington and Trenton), so we know where to start looking
- Jeremiah Basse’s will is quoted in the deed, so we know he has one
- We know his wife and children’s names, and who his daughters married. We can search christenings and marriage records for all of these individuals.
- Birchfield died young, but we don’t know how old he was at the time of his death. Would he have had an estate? Did he get married?

Spoilers: Anne has a colonial marriage bond dated 1727 to Joseph Pidgeon. She was over 21 at the time of her marriage (no permission note). Her marriage is also announced in the extracts to colonial newspapers. She and her husband and his two sons lived in Falls Township PA. Joseph Pidgeon dies within two years of their marriage in 1728, and Anne moves to Trenton and does not remarry. She may possibly be William Pidgeon’s mother, as Joseph Pidgeon Jr. (son of Anne’s husband Joseph and his first wife Rebecca Wheeler) is named in his maternal grandmother’s will, but William is not. Katherine and her first husband Robert Talbot married by 1723 (as per a land grant given to them for land adjoining her parents’ as a wedding present). They do not have a marriage record of any kind. Robert’s estate is probated in 1725. Katherine has a Colonial Marriage Bond for her second husband Edward Peirce in 1730. The couple has one daughter, Eliza Ann. Edward’s estate is probated in 1739. Eliza Ann marries Abraham Cottnam in 1760. Katherine dies March 28, 1774 at Trenton and is buried at St. Mary’s Church Burlington March 30, 1774. Abraham Cottnam is the administrator of her estate. Birchfield was apprenticed to a ship’s captain in 1725 after his father’s death by his mother, whose permission was required since he was under 21, and brother-in-law Robert Talbot. He has no marriage record. His will was probated in 1734 in England after he died on a sea voyage, and he does not appear to have a wife or children. None of the children (Birchfield, Anne, Katherine) have birth or christening records.
Here’s How to Research Jeremiah

- Remember, we start at Jeremiah’s Death and work our way up to his Birth
- We start with his will, which names his wife and gives us a date of probate.
- We can check the Extracts from Colonial Newspapers and the Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey to see if we can get an exact date of death or his marriage record or his birth (if he was born in NJ)
- We can check further deeds to see if we can find more details about his estate
- We can check the Supreme Court to see if we can find any estate cases
- We can check the family histories to see if we have any books about the Basse family

Yes, I would love to start with Jeremiah’s granddaughter Eliza Ann Peirce Cottnam and work our way back, but I don’t think we have time and I fear everyone’s eyes would start to glaze over from all the Basse anyway!
Spoilers

- Jeremiah’s estate was probated in December 1724, his wife is Elizabeth. Elizabeth advertises in a newspaper a sale of Jeremiah’s library after his death in a Burlington newspaper, which helps us narrow a timeframe. His date of death does not appear in the Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey, and there is not a Supreme Court Case related to his death, nor is there a Basse Family History available.
- Jeremiah and Elizabeth’s marriage does not appear in the Genealogical Magazine or the Colonial Marriage Bonds Index.
- However...in the deeds, we find Jeremiah and Joshua Barkstead selling land to Mary Basse and Francis Barkstead in England (Book B(WJ) p.486). Mary is Jeremiah’s mother and Joshua and Francis are two of his brothers. Since his mother and brother are in England, we can make an educated guess that Jeremiah was born there, and may have been married there. We know that his mother, Mary, was married twice and have both of her married names. We can investigate which husband came first and find the name of Jeremiah’s father.
Spoilers II

- Jeremiah and Elizabeth were married in 1701 in London, England. Elizabeth's maiden name is Curtiss. (Source: National Archives at Kew, their marriage record)
- Jeremiah's father's name is Richard Basse and he married Mary Barkstead (widow of John Barkstead, who was a regicide executed in 1662-several books about the English Civil War mention him.) in 1664 in London. (Source, National Archives at Kew, their Marriage record)
- Richard and Mary had two children: Jeremiah (b.1666) and Hester (b.1669). (Source: National Archives at Kew, Jeremiah and Hester's baptismal records)
- Mary's maiden name is Nunn and she married John "Baxsted" in 1644. (National Archives at Kew, their marriage record)
Takeaways

- Always start with yourself and work your way back. Later records are in general easier to work with and will give you more information (thus allowing you to familiarize yourself with research strategies and resources)
- Don’t skip ahead so you can get into DAR or Colonial Dames more quickly!
- Your goal is to find a Birth, Marriage, and Death for each ancestor, starting with Death ending with Birth.
- If your ancestor married or died after May 1848 get those Vital Records! Remember, these are the most authoritative source of personal information
- The State Archives and County Offices have Primary Documents, the State Library has some Primary Documents (newspapers, and city directories) but mostly published Secondary Resources
- The State Library has electronic resources such as Ancestry and HeritageQuest, which have some digitized records.
- Although researching pre-May 1848 ancestors can be difficult, it’s not impossible, and records sets are available!
THANK YOU!

Please give me Feedback on this presentation and some of the resources! I'm happy to help in person, or remotely!

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